

THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

pro bono humani generis

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Mr. William J. Clinton
President
The White House
Washington DC 20500

Dear Mr. President

This is about mycoherbicides.

I think you know I would not detain you on any matter of less than national importance.

Mycoherbicides may sound like a chemical weed killer, but they are living fungi intended to destroy a crop by intentional, contagious plant disease. Mycoherbicides have been intensively developed at the initiative of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), by the USDA. You will not, however, find the term mycoherbicide or Fusarium, a fungus designed to eradicate the coca crop in Colombia, on the ONDCP web site. It does appear in the bill recently passed by the House, H.R.3908 - 2000: Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act: see enclosure.

This is one of a series of actions that appears to be converging on the large scale application of Fusarium in Colombia. You will see from the House bill the financial pressure being exerted on Colombia to ensure their sovereign acquiescence to this project, and hence avoid overt violation of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).

Nevertheless I submit that this proposed policy is ill-founded, and could do great harm to our national security and international relations. It therefore warrants your personal attention to assure that it does not slip by without the appropriate interagency and technical review. I can assure you I know of many people in the defense, intelligence, law enforcement and agricultural communities who are either totally unaware of what is burgeoning, or are opposed but have been silenced.

Here are my concerns:

- 1). Will the Fusarium restrict its attack to the illicit coca plantations, or might it spread (or appear to spread) to other crops? Testing environmental safety of an aggressive pathogen is very difficult on small plots at best, and requires close attention to matters of local climate,

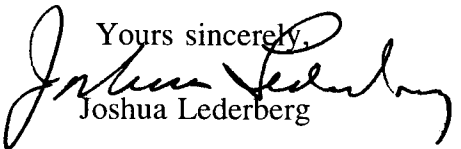
native insects and bridging weeds. Conversely how quickly will Fusarium-resistant strains of coca emerge and negate the intended benefits? Who will determine that environmental safety, and how credible will that determination be?

2). It will set an example, and if successful, a proof of principle about ways to attack our own agricultural economy -- avenues to which we are already exquisitely vulnerable. It is all too well known that the importation of a single sick cow with Foot and Mouth disease -- or parts thereof -- could initiate an outbreak in this country with devastating consequences. Please do request a briefing on what has happened lately in Taiwan. And imagine if the Nipah virus which has eventuated in many human casualties and the slaughter of at least a million swine in Malaysia were to be brought to our soil.

3). Our homeland security against bioterrorist and other bioattack depends on cooperation with many other countries, many of them not necessarily closely aligned. We try to bolster the high ground mapped by the BWC that biological weapons are a special threat to all humanity, that they should be regarded with special opprobrium. That will be eroded if we pursue unilateral decisions concerning the occasions that justify the use of biological agents in support of other policy objectives.

4). A successful attack, with the example noted, will provoke exactly the kind of people who would be motivated to exact revenge; and we had better steel ourselves to greatly enhancing our preparations for managing bioattacks on our own agriculture, and for recriminations about the Pandora's Box we will be opening.

Mr. President, I do not ask you to take definitive or public action on this matter. I do beg you to establish an independent, executive inquiry as to the merits of these concerns, weighing them against the gains expected. Whatever action is taken should be a deliberate one taking account of the broad policy stakes.

Yours sincerely,

 Joshua Lederberg